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FIGHTING TO MAKE A POINT: POLICY-MAKING BY AGGRESSIVE WAR ON THE CHINESE BORDERS

ROY C. PETTIS, JR.
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SEMINAR K

PROFESSOR
DR. DANIEL T. KEUHL

ADVISOR
DR. CHARLES A. STEVENSON

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FIGHTING TO MAKE A POINT: POLICY-MAKING BY AGGRESSIVE WAR ON THE CHINESE BORDERS

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has twice initiated high-intensity war to accomplish limited political objectives, maintaining proportionality by keeping the wars short and the political objectives paramount. China invaded India in 1962 and, after a month of uninterrupted military success, withdrew its forces and established unchallenged control of a border region that had been under PRC control at the beginning of the war. When China invaded Vietnam across a 450-mile front in 1979, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) performed poorly but achieved several political objectives.

These PRC-initiated border wars reflect a different conception of limited war than the United States usually associates with that term. The wars more nearly reflect the relationship between military means and political ends found in the dynastic wars of 18th Century Europe, when a short intense war might be conducted to establish advantage in the next negotiations. Observations about the conduct and character of these wars are important to understanding the PRC approach to war, and might be relevant to future crises between the PRC and Taiwan.

China's 1962 War with India[1]

Once the PRC took control of Tibet in 1950, China claimed traditional rights to 36,000 square miles in India's easternmost province of Assam and 15,000 square miles in the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir in the North. India and China held several unsuccessful meetings about the border definition, never quite establishing formal negotiations. Skirmishes between border posts became endemic, with significant flare-ups in 1958-59.

Border skirmishes did not prepare India for October 20, 1962, when the first group of 20,000 PLA troops began a well-planned assault across the Thagla Ridge, near the northernmost and best-defended point of the Chinese border with India's province of Assam. Almost simultaneously, China attacked at the southern end of the Tibetan border with the Ladakh region of Kashmir. The next day China opened a third front near the triple border of China, India and Burma. PLA maneuvers through the mountain terrain repeatedly flanked Indian formations that moved only on the limited roads in both regions. In addition, the Chinese used skillfully timed electronic attacks on Indian military communications. Throughout the campaign, China supported their advance by constructing temporary supply roads in some of the most difficult terrain in the world. On the fourth day of fighting, China offered to negotiate a ceasefire if both sides withdrew equal distances from the current line-of-control, but India insisted that China must return to the positions held before the war. By the end of the first week, China had inflicted over 8,000 casualties and completely cut off an additional Indian brigade in the east from communication and supply. The PLA controlled several Indian cities, and was close to clearing a path to the capital of both provinces. Most observers felt that the two Indian provinces would be overrun, consolidating the Chinese fronts into a single army advancing south.

To appease angry public sentiment, Indian Prime Minister Nehru dismissed his Defense Minister and other Cabinet officials. On October 29, India abandoned its previous position of absolute non-alignment and requested emergency military aid from the United States. The United States, Great Britain and Canada took seriously Nehru's fear that China was attempting a conquest of India, and developed a joint plan that began to provide emergency military supplies to India on November 3. By this time, the PLA controlled a portion of India equal in area to Great Britain.

On November 8, China offered a cease-fire plan in which each side would withdraw their troops twelve-and-one-half miles behind the positions held on November 7, 1959, thereby creating a buffer zone between the countries. This proposal would abandon any Chinese territorial gains from the invasion, despite success on the battlefield. China timed this offer to coincide with a renewed PLA offensive directed towards the vital Digboi oil fields in Assam. Nehru ignored the Chinese offer, and put a major diplomatic effort into seeking Soviet affirmation of their existing promise to sell MIG-21 aircraft to India. Moscow had expressed support for the Chinese territorial claims when the invasion began, and obviously found it difficult to deliver weapons that could be used against China. But Nehru was able to announce on November 10 that Moscow would stand by the promised mid-December delivery of the MIGs, and his hope was that Moscow would now restrain the PRC. Instead, the PLA broke through on all fronts on November 18, encircled and captured an Indian battalion in Assam, and caused an Indian retreat on that front of at least 80 miles. The PLA then outflanked the Indian 4th Division in a drive on the major city of Tezpur, captured a major supply base, and forced a hasty retreat of the army headquarters in Assam.

On November 21, to the surprise of everyone, the PRC announced a unilateral cease-fire and indicated it would begin withdrawing troops on December 1 to establish a buffer zone identical with their November 8 proposal. By December 10 PLA forces had retreated to a point behind their starting locations. An official Indian denial, on December 15, that India was moving troops into the demilitarized zone defined by the Chinese announcement reflected Indian acceptance of the PRC-dictated resolution.

Strategic Assessment

China's strategic objective for this campaign was to achieve Indian acceptance of Chinese control over the Ladakh bulge, a region representing less than one-quarter of the disputed territories.[2] The Ladakh bulge extends eastward from India-controlled Kashmir to form a thick wedge between the boundaries of Tibet and Xinjiang, provinces firmly under PRC control in 1962. Chinese forces had occupied the bulge before the war, but India continued to maintain traditional trade routes through the bulge into both provinces and provide a "back door" for Western influence. China had built a major road across the Ladakh bulge to connect its two provinces. In April 1960, Zhou Enlai had proposed to Nehru that an appropriate resolution to a decade of argument about the borders would be to accept Chinese control of the Ladakh bulge in exchange for Chinese acceptance of all other Indian borders,[3] essentially the resolution China imposed at the end of the war. Chinese withdrawal in Assam to a defensive line *behind* the borders claimed by India, despite dramatic PRC military successes in that rich province, clarifies the PRC focus on control of the Ladakh.

In contrast to this explanation, most Western leaders at the time saw the PRC-initiated war as part of an integrated Communist gamble for domination. The month-long Sino-Indian war began just before the Cuban missile crisis, and the Chinese withdrawal announcement occurred the day after President Kennedy announced the lifting of the U.S. naval blockade on Cuba. With what we now know of that period, it appears unlikely that China and the USSR would have coordinated military adventures in 1962. [4]

The PRC military objective was probably to demonstrate that it could impose a military solution on the border dispute on India, and maintain the threat of a future invasion to ensure an operational peace that would neutralize Indian paths into the Ladakh bulge. Assam (a province with high quality agriculture, oil resources, and a strategic location surrounding East Pakistan) was of more strategic importance to India than the northern territories where Chinese interests focused. China attacked both this perceived center-of-gravity for India, and attacked deeply into the Kashmir region adjoining the Ladakh bulge to leave no doubt about China's ability to take the territory they wanted.

The Chinese developed new military capabilities and tactics to match their military goals. Training in the mountains of Tibet, PLA troops learned to operate in the high altitude and rough terrain without relying on the limited road network for transportation or supply. Such capabilities completely overcame Indian defensive plans, which had relied on the Himalayan crest to protect it from serious Chinese invasion. PLA tactics and operations systematically cut off individual Indian forces from physical and electronic lines of communication. Preparations for the war probably took more than a year.[5]

The PRC had the advantage of knowing that its campaign would be limited in duration, and that Western support for India would require time to organize. China correctly understood that India had not prepared for conflict above squad-level skirmishes on the border. The PRC executed a short, effective campaign to demonstrate the PLA ability to define its borders. With a de-militarized zone established around the Chinese-dictated lines, these border regions have ceased to be a flashpoint between the two countries.

China's 1979 Invasion of Vietnam[6]

After the consolidation of Vietnam under Hanoi in 1975, China feared that Vietnam would become part of a Soviet strategy to contain Chinese participation in international affairs. The PRC vacillated between attempts to build good relations and creating crises with Hanoi. In 1978, two things solidified a relationship of conflict. The USSR and Vietnam signed a 25-year Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which discouraged Chinese hopes of disconnecting Vietnam from the Soviet orbit. Second, Vietnam invaded China's ally Cambodia, which China interpreted as a step towards an Soviet management of Indochina. When the rainy season stopped the Vietnamese advance in Cambodia, both China and Vietnam began to report regular border skirmishes that further soured relations. In January 1979, during a visit to the United States, Chinese Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping spoke of the need to "teach Vietnam a lesson."

On February 17, 1979, China invaded Vietnam in ten directions across the entire 450-mile border, using over 250,000 troops supported by armor, artillery and aircraft. On the first day of fighting, Radio Bejing declared that this would be a limited operation of short duration, with no design on Vietnamese territory. Perhaps because of this announcement, or because two-thirds of Vietnam's 600,000-person army was in the south or in Cambodia, Vietnam pursued a strategy of limited defensive engagement, and avoided a major concentration of its forces. At first the PLA advanced swiftly and took four provincial capitals in the first week, but the advance slowed significantly at that point. The Vietnamese conducted hit-and-run attacks on PLA flanks. It became apparent that the Vietnamese had more modern equipment, which allowed them significantly greater mobility even fighting with only militia and regional forces. The war settled into a slow effort to take the nine northern provincial capitals in block-to-block fighting.

The prospect for a quick victory of annihilation had passed by March 1, and China proposed peace talks. The PLA simultaneously stepped up a costly assault on Lang Son, the last northern provincial capital not controlled by the Chinese. On March 4, Lang Son was reduced to ruins by artillery, and the Chinese took possession. The PRC announced on the next day that it had met its objectives and would begin withdrawing its troops; the day after that Vietnam agreed to peace talks. PLA withdrawal was complete by March 17. The invasion was widely judged militarily embarrassing and economically costly to China, and a victory for Vietnam. Chinese casualties are estimated at 46,000, and the PRC lost 400 tanks and spend over 1.3 billion dollars on the war.

Strategic Assessment

Most writers have judged that the strategic objective of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam was to punish Vietnam for ingratitude to previous Chinese support and for alignment with Russia.[7] But some practical objectives are also discernable from PRC statements at the time. First, China intended to divert military forces and attention from the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.[8] The PRC sought to demonstrate that Vietnam would have to deal directly with China and address Chinese concerns, by proving that China was willing to fight Vietnam and Soviet protection was unlikely.[9] It seems likely that the PRC also planned to demonstrate that China was willing to fight, and could be a reliable ally to other countries in Southeast Asia.

The PRC planned military objectives to meet these political objectives by attacking the Vietnamese military as the center-of-gravity, perceived to be the military forces protecting the industrial cities of north Vietnam. The PRC expected to engage and annihilate the limited reserve of Vietnamese forces in the north and repeat the successes of 1962. The PLA assembled

adequate numbers and types of military units, outnumbering the Vietnamese forces available in the north, and prepared the invasion over a period of months. The PRC strategic failure was misjudging the character and conduct that Vietnam could impose on the war.

Additional factors in the military failure of the Chinese invasion was the PRC's lack of appreciation that evolving technology could give the Vietnamese better mobility[10] and that organizational chaos during the Cultural Revolution had reduced PLA effectiveness compared to 1962.[11] After the war, PRC leadership apparently concluded that a tested military strategy had floundered on military incompetence and technological change. China learned that it could not fight a modern war without streamlining its military, and one immediate result of the war was a Chinese program of significant military reform and equipment modernization.

Despite the military costs and failure to achieve the original military objectives, the invasion of Vietnam cannot be considered a complete failure for Chinese policy. The PRC created and implemented an alternative military objective of destroying provincial capitals, and Vietnam's economic growth was slowed by the need to rebuild several of its northern cities. Vietnam eventually had to transfer and maintain additional military units in the North even after the war with China. Although Cambodia eventually fell, replacement of the Khmer Rouge regime did not lead to new Soviet alliances in Indochina. In fact, the PRC was able to negotiate new security agreements with all of Vietnam's neighbors after 1979.[12]

Observations on the Character and Conduct of these Wars

In both conflicts China maintained focus on political objectives in spite of obvious temptations. In the Sino-Indian war, there must have been significant temptation was to expand the original

and assert control over all China's historic territorial claims in India. During the Vietnamese War, the temptation would have been to maintain the original military objective of destroying a major Vietnamese military force and thereby redeem the military prowess of the PLA forces.

China demonstrated significant flexibility in defining operational means. China clearly expected the invasion of India would force peace negotiations with India that would legitimize the Chinese control in the Ladakh bulge, but the PRC eventually concluded that unilateral definition of a demilitarized zone would meet their needs. When Vietnam proved unwilling to meet the PLA in a major battle, China redefined the military objective as conquering the regional capitals in North Vietnam.

In both wars, China used direct and indirect approaches to reach their political goals. The Ladakh region of India, which abutted China's territorial interest, was attacked in parallel with the Assam region where China perceived the center-of-gravity for India. China reinforced Cambodian troops and air support against Vietnam but also attacked the perceived center-of-gravity in the Vietnam's industrial north.

Appropriate numbers and types of military units were assembled to overwhelm local opponents, but these were coupled with careful preparation and operational inventiveness. Even in the unsuccessful attempt to annihilate Vietnamese forces, the plan included a practiced broad-front encirclement that would ensure engagement no matter where the Vietnamese concentrated their forces (but which failed to predict a Vietnamese refusal to concentrate at all).

Implications for PRC Conflict with Taiwan

There are two observations about these PRC limited wars that may be relevant if the U.S. contemplates intervening in a future conflict between the PRC and Taiwan: the PRC willingness to use significant force for limited political objectives, and the combination of direct and indirect approaches when implementing such attacks.

China's willingness to use large-scale force does not always imply commitment to conquest. The United States generally expects large-scale attacks to reflect equivalently large military and political objectives. But these two border wars suggest that a large-scale sustained attack might represent a Chinese reaction to unacceptable Taiwan political actions, intended to inflict enough pain on Taiwan to change the political position. It is also important to listen to Chinese statements of their objectives. China may deceive and mislead, but China sometimes seeks only the limited objectives they claim. Limited objectives may be resolved without U.S. commitment to an unconstrained war with China.

Chinese commitment to the indirect approach suggests that military force directed towards Taiwan would probably be coupled with activity intended to remind the United States of higher national priorities. Such actions could include military action on our allies with explicitly limited objectives, or, as a demonstration, an unarmed missile launch across the length of the United States into the Atlantic Ocean.

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[1] The primary source used for the description of the Sino-Indian War is A History of Sino-Indian Relations: Hostile Co-existence (John Rowland, 1967, D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., New York), P.166-173.

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[2] This is the accepted explanation in recent books. For example, see Understanding Contemporary China (Robert E. Garner, 1999, Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc., Boulder, Colorado) P. 168.

[3] Rowland, John, A History of Sino-Indian Relations: Hostile Co-existence, 1967, D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., New York. P. 141.

[4] Garner, Robert E., Understanding Contemporary China, 1999, Lynne Reinner Publishers, Inc., Boulder, Colorado. P. 190. See also Rowland, 1967, p. 168. The Sino-Soviet split had become significant in 1960, when the Soviets called back all the technical advisors that had been supporting Chinese development. There is some evidence that China sought Soviet concurrence before initiating the assault, it seems unlikely that the Soviets would have known in the weeks before October 20 that a major crisis with the U.S. was imminent.

[5] Sinha, Satyanarayan, China Strikes, 1964, Blandford Press, London. P. 77-83.

[6] The primary source used for the description of the Sino-Vietnamese War is The Rise of Modern China (Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, 1995, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York), P.795-798.

[7] Garner, 1999. P. 192.

[8] Ross, Robert S., The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy 1975-1979, 1988, Columbia University Press. P. 198.

[9] Ross, 1988. P. 232-234.

[10] Ross, 1988. P. 232.

[11] Hsu, Immanuel C.Y., The Rise of Modern China, 1995, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York. P. 798. See also Garner, op cit. P. 192.

[12] Ross, 1988. P. 236.